Knowledge and Ignorance

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One striking feature of Indian philosophers' concern with knowledge—especially in Advaita Vedanta—is the way a theory of ignorance is made to play a central role in the theory of knowledge (analogously to the role a theory of error plays in the theory of truth). In this paper I will focus on this dialectic of knowledge and ignorance (as I shall call it), and will draw attention to some interesting consequences of this way of looking at things.

I

For all Indian philosophers : (1) *knowledge manifests its object.* (Nothing like the Kantian Copernican revolution is to be found here.) This is almost an axiomatic truth. Better still, it is a fundamental descriptive determination of what knowledge is. It can be either knowledge of what is already known, or knowledge of what was previously unknown. The former presupposes the latter: at some point, the object (of knowledge) must have first emerged from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. (2) There is an undeniable phenomenon which may be called 'progress of knowledge'. As *knowledge progresses, what was hitherto unknown comes to be known.* This may be the same object which in one respect was known, and in

others unknown, so that with the progress of knowledge, aspects hitherto undiscovered come to light. No matter if it is a new object or only a new aspect of an old familiar object, the phenomenon under consideration would be the same.

To these two phenomena, I will add a third: (3) If an object (or an aspect of an object) is known (i.e. manifested), there is an awareness of what lies beyond it in its generic features, even before the latter is manifested in its specificity. To be aware of the limits of one's knowledge (i.e., that one knows so far, not beyond) is to be aware of what lies beyond, on the other side of that limit. It is this awareness which makes progress of knowledge possible. What was beyond the horizon now comes to the focus. One explores what was vaguely anticipated. All this requires *some awareness of what is not yet manifested.*

(4) This leads to a fourth, and for the Advaita Vedanta, a most important phenomenon: In knowing I am not only aware of knowing what I know, but also aware of my ignorance of what I do not know. *Awareness of knowledge and awareness of ignorance go together* inasmuch as there is an awareness of the limit of what I know. Using the metaphors of light and darkness for knowledge and ignorance respectively, we can say : We find ourselves, in the empirical cognitive situation, in a state, as it were, of light and darkness mingled together. More and more light dispels more and more darkness. Just as there is awareness of light manifesting whatever is manifested, so there is awareness of darkness concealing whatever is concealed.

(5) If all things are divided into those that are known (by any subject) and those that are unknown (by the same subject), then we can say—can't we? —that *all things are objects of awareness, either as known or as unknown.*

II

In the above phenomenology, I have used three different terms: *awareness*, *knowledge* and *ignorance*. It is important that we clearly determine the differences between awareness and knowledge as I use those words. The closest Sanskrit words for these two are *cit* and *jñāna*

respectively. However, the latter two words are not always used as though they stood for different things. As a matter of fact, sometimes they are taken to mean the same. For my present purpose, 'knowledge' means manifestation of an object to a subject; this manifestation occurs through a cognitive state which has that object as its object. As and when the subject has that cognitive state, and so *knows* the object, she is also *aware* of having that cognitive state. Thus, while knowledge is *of* an object, awareness is *of* the knowledge. What I am aware of —according to this usage—is not the tree over there, but my seeing it (likewise, not the snake I see, but my seeing it, also my being afraid of it, to consider non-cognitive states as well). In this sense I am also aware of my pleasure and pain, hopes and desires (and of their objects only secondarily inasmuch as their objects intentionally 'inexist' in them). I am also aware of not knowing what the prime number between 1000 and 2000 is, or of not knowing *who* the murderer of Mr. Smith is. If I am aware of knowing an object, one can elliptically express the same situation by saying that I am aware of that object qua known. Likewise in the case of ignorance.

The idea of 'ignorance' is not also free from equivocation. I will distinguish between two cases : first, the case where I can say 'I am ignorant of Q. M.'; and second, the case where I am not even in a position to say of an X that I am ignorant of it. Of Quantum Mechanics, I know that it is a part of modern physics, I know that it was founded by Bohr and Heisenberg, I know in general about Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy, but I do not know the details of the theory, the mathematics of it, or the experimental part of it. So I can very well say, I do not know Q. M. Here some knowledge and mostly ignorance are together; so that I can say, *on my own*, that I am ignorant of Q. M., I do not know it as a physicist would. It is as though I see a thing in a dimly lit place, where I see *that* thing, but do not quite see what it is. But there are things of which I am ignorant, but it would seem that I cannot even say *what* those things are I am ignorant of. *I* cannot say, on my own, that I do not know it, that is to say, *unless* some one else asked me 'Do you know that ....?', in which case of course I would say 'no'. Of things at the bottom of the ocean, or of things deep inside the earth—to take examples from Berkeley—I can say I do not know what they are. For if I gave, or am given, some description of a thing, I can say whether I know it or do not know it. But of things of which I have no description save and except that they are unknown to me, I cannot say I do not know them for I cannot say what 'them' stands for. So it would seem that while in some cases of things of which I am ignorant I can say I am ignorant of them (in such cases some identifying description is at my disposal, even a demonstrative 'that thing over there'), in others I cannot *say* I am ignorant of them (for I cannot say whom I mean by 'them'), no identifying description other than that I am ignorant of them is available to me. Can I say in the latter case that the object is an object of awareness qua an object of ignorance? [To appreciate the logic of how the latter sort of case is possible, note that from the fact that I know that things belonging to a set W are unknown to me, it does not follow that of every w belonging to W, I know that it is unknown to me (for I may not know of a particular w, say w_n that it belongs to W)]

This case calls into question the Vedanta thesis that since a thing is either known or unknown to me, any object whatsoever is an object of my awareness either as known or as unknown. The putative w_n is not an object of my awareness qua unknown, even if it is unknown.

Before I return to this objection, let me go back to the phenomenology outlined in section I, and elaborate some of its rationale.

III

The Vedanta epistemologists had to face two questions which were directed against both their epistemological and their metaphysical theses. The metaphysical thesis concerned the locus, *āśraya*, of the original ignorance responsible for the appearance of world and finite individuals when there is only one undifferentiated reality. An obvious objection against this thesis was: *Whose* ignorance is it? Ignorance can belong only to a being who is capable of knowing. There are only two such: the finite individual and the infinite Brahman. To say that ignorance belongs to the former is to be involved in a circularity

inasmuch as the finite individual, on the theory, is a product of that ignorance. The Vivaraṇa school, therefore, regards Brahman as the locus of ignorance. But such a position appears to be inconsistent, since Brahman is, on the theory under consideration, all-knowing, indeed of the nature of knowledge, *jñānasvarūpa*. How can such a being harbour ignorance?

The solution lies in distinguishing between two senses of 'knowledge', in one of which knowledge is opposed to (in the sense of destroying) ignorance, while in the other knowledge is not so opposed. In the latter sense, knowledge is the same as awareness (=consciousness, *cit*), in the former sense knowledge is a cognitive state. If a subject S is ignorant of an object O, that ignorance is removed by a valid cognitive state (in S) which has O as its object, a cognitive state which has O as its content or *ākāra*. (Those who know should be able to identify that I mean by 'cognitive state' what Vedantic authors mean by *vṛttijñāna*, and by 'awareness' what they mean by *sākṣicaitanya*.) What then opposes ignorance is knowledge as a valid cognitive state, when both have the same subject and the same object, whereas awareness (and *in the long run* Ātman =Brahman, the Self) is not opposed to anything (including ignorance) and so manifests all things including both knowledge in the first sense as well as ignorance. In the technical language of Advaita, awareness becomes a valid, cognitive state or *pramā* when it is reflected in an appropriately *form*-ed mental state. The light of the sun does not burn, but nourishes all things, the same sunrays burn a blade of grass if focused on it through a powerful lens. What destroys ignorance then, is knowledge, and what manifests ignorance is awareness.

My awareness of ignorance is expressed in the judgement, 'I am ignorant of O.' What kind of judgement is it? In the Advaita Vedanta theory, ignorance of O is not mere absence of knowledge of O, but something positive which, like darkness, conceals a thing. (It is to be expected that Advaita Vedanta would push this analogy through by arguing that darkness is not the mere absence of light but a positive entity.) One of the arguments given in favour of the view that ignorance is a positive entity, and not mere absence of knowledge is that if it were mere absence of knowledge it would be impossible to account for our knowledge of ignorance. For, then, my knowledge of my ignorance of O would be the same as my knowledge of the absence of knowledge of O in me, and since knowledge of an absence presupposes familiarity with that which is absent (I cannot know that elephants are absent here unless I know what elephants are); in order to know the absence of knowledge of O (in me) I must already have knowledge of O, in which case I would be knowing O and so not be ignorant of O. On the Vedanta theory, however, I can know of O as concealed by my ignorance, just as seeing something in a dark room I would say 'I do not know', i.e. 'am ignorant of, what *that* thing is.' But again, to be able to say 'I am ignorant of what *that* thing is,' I must also know *that* thing, even if merely qua that thing.

This argument leads to the conclusion *that nothing is unknown to me in all respects,* that with regard to any thing whatsoever there must be some respect in which it is known. To put it perspicuously,

(For all X) [there is a Ø such that X is Ø → X is known to be Ø]

Earlier I had formulated the Vedanta thesis, following the Vivaraṇa thus: All things are objects of awareness, either as known or as unknown.

(*Sarvaṁ vastu jñātatayā ajñātatayā vā sākṣicaitanyasya viṣaya eva*)

Now, I will slightly modify it: instead of 'either-or' in the above formulation, I will write 'and' (instead of '*vā*', write '*ca*'). Then we have:

All things are objects of awareness, as known *and* as unknown.

(Note, and I repeat, that an object *per se* is never an object of awareness, its knowledge and its ignorance are objects of awareness—which is the same as saying that the object qua object of knowledge and qua object of ignorance is an object of awareness.)

Now the position I have arrived at is no doubt a departure from the traditional Advaita thesis. Let us now focus on that and see what it amounts to.

The original thesis amounts to dividing up, at any time, and for any subject, all things into those that are known and those that are unknown, and then saying that both groups of things are presented to awareness—the former as known, the latter as unknown.

The revised thesis does not so divide up all things, but holds, with regard to each thing, at any time and for any subject, that it is both known and unknown—known with regard to some aspects and unknown with

regard to others, generally speaking known with regard to generalities, *sāmānyataḥ*, and unknown with respect to specific aspects, *viśeṣataḥ*. Progress of Knowledge is not movement from complete ignorance to full knowledge, but from less adequate knowledge to more adequate. The revised thesis is quite compatible with the Nyāya thesis that no cognition is erroneous in all respects, and that no perceptual cognition can be erroneous with regard to the demonstrative element functioning as its subject term (*idantvena*).

IV

Uptil now, I have said that both knowledge and ignorance may have the same object O, in which case the former will destroy the latter. I have also said that when I see that thing over there in darkness, I say 'I do not know what that is', I may say 'I am ignorant of what that is,'—in which case one is tempted to say that ignorance (belonging to me) conceals that object over there. The locus or *āśraya* of the ignorance is my self (for ignorance must belong to the sort of entity which is also capable of knowledge), while the object or *viṣaya* of ignorance is that object over there. Now that is *not* quite the thesis of Advaita Vedanta. Even without the help of Vedanta, one can describe the situation by saying that that object over there is concealed by darkness (in the example given) and not by ignorance. The Advaita position therefore requires that despite the analogy pressed between darkness and ignorance, what conceals the object when I do not know it is ignorance, and not darkness (even if darkness is a contributing factor to my ignorance). But again as just said, this too is not the Advaita position.

The Advaita view is based on the right insight that the proper object of ignorance can only be that which, without such concealment, can show itself. A material object, or for that matter, an object in the strict sense, is not self-manifesting. For ignorance to conceal it therefore would be entirely pointless, for what is the need for concealing what in any case cannot show itself? What is needed then is to conceal that which manifests itself and also manifests all other things. (Pressing the analogy already hinted at, if you wish to conceal a thing from view, it would not do to

cover it up with a cloth, what you should do is to cover the source of light which reveals it.) Since the only thing which is self-manifesting is Consciousness, that is the only proper object of concealment by ignorance. But obviously when I am ignorant of O_1, but know O_2, what is concealed is not consciousness as such, but consciousness as limited by O_1 (for otherwise if all consciousness were concealed, I would not know anything). The object of ignorance when I say 'I do not know O_1' then, is *consciousness as limited by* O_1 (not simply O_1).

Not only, as stated earlier, is it redundant for ignorance to conceal O_1, there is a further consideration why O_1 is not the proper object of ignorance. For if it were so, then my ignorance itself would not be known. Ignorance is revealed, manifested, established precisely by that very consciousness which it conceals. The author of *Vivaraṇa* illustrates the situation with the example of *Rāhu*—the demon whose existence is manifested only as it conceals the moon.

So the thesis is that ignorance of O_1 conceals consciousness as limited by O_1. But what is the locus, the *āśrâya*, of that ignorance? In my previous and provisional account, the locus is 'I' (as expressed in 'I am ignorant'.) But if 'I' stands for the inner sense, the *antaḥkaraṇa* which in the theory is something *jaḍa* or *a-cit*, it cannot function either as the locus of ignorance or as the locus of knowledge. The locus then has to be consciousness but only as limited by the 'I'. What this entails is that the *locus* and the *object* of ignorance are the same—namely, consciousness. Ignorance, so it is said, has the audacity to seek to conceal precisely that on which it rests (just as the bottom of a lamp remains in the dark!).

Note that this is a description not alone of the ignorance of Brahman, but also of the ignorance of the shell in front of me which I mistake for silver. In the latter case, the locus of ignorance is consciousness as limited by I, while the object of ignorance (namely, that which is concealed) is consciousness as limited by the yonder shell.

Let me, at this point, briefly clarify how I construe the locution 'consciousness as limited by the shell'. There are two pictures it calls to mind. The one is that of a vast infinite space-like, all-pervasive substance which is then seemingly cut up into parts, but only seemingly, by the regions occupied by different objects (this tree, that mountain, and so

on). The other one, more correctly, understands consciousness, not as a thing, not as an entity, not as what Heidegger would regard as something *vorhanden*, but as a function of manifestation, as just manifesting itself and others, as an aura of illuminating illumination, showing up, to the subject, each sundry object. The further locution of 'ignorance, concealing the consciousness as limited by the shell' fits the second picture better: what this covering up does is to let that aura, that light, be seemingly extinguished thus leaving the object in 'darkness' as it were, as unknown—but not in utter anonymity, but certainly manifested to awareness as unknown, which only testifies to the fact that ignorance does not totally extinguish the manifesting consciousness, for if it did so then the whole world would have been in darkness (*jagadāndhyaprasaṅga*). I prefer the second of the two pictures. Only one more remark is needed to correct it for my present story.

My story suggests that the light of consciousness was manifesting an object when it was suddenly extinguished, though seemingly so, by ignorance. However, this part of the picture is misleading, as far as the Advaita position is concerned. Knowledge in this view, is not cancelled by ignorance, manifestation by non-manifestation. Ignorance, being beginningless, is already there to begin with; it is destroyed by ignorance. From 'I am ignorant of O' (which articulates the awareness that the object is not being manifested to me by any of the *pramāṇas*), I pass on to 'I know O'. Ignorance *was* there to begin with, and points to the *future* possibility of knowledge. Likewise, knowledge of an object points to the *past* ignorance (of that object) which has been destroyed. With these last remarks, I am drawing close to the last phase of my account.

V

A DIALECTICAL REVERSAL. OMNISCIENCE, TEMPORALITY

There are many other aspects of the idea of ignorance which are rather fascinating. But I want to draw attention to only some of them.

1. The first puzzling aspect is that both consciousness and ignorance being beginningless (with the difference that ignorance alone of the two has an end), the relation between the two is also beginningless. This thesis was for me, hard to understand for a long time. But I think I now understand why ignorance has to be beginningless. A very simple move shows that: It makes no sense to ask, 'when did you begin to be ignorant of such and such object?' You can only ask, 'When did you cease to be ignorant of it?' (Consciousness is held to be beginningless, for the absence of consciousness must itself be 'established' by consciousness. I will not here argue for this last thesis, however.) Now the thesis that consciousness and ignorance are related to each other from beginningless time has interesting implications. Pure consciousness, consciousness (*cit*), which constitutes the essence of Brahman, is not opposed to ignorance. Let us remember that in the Advaita theory, pure Consciousness is not opposed to anything, for it manifests all things including ignorance. The relation between consciousness and ignorance is *not due to* ignorance. Now this beginningless juxtaposition of the two—consciousness and ignorance—is a nice ontological reversal: What on a superficial understanding seems to be a contradiction, is not really so. The opposition is only seemingly so. Ignorance goes with consciousness, consciousness 'tolerates' ignorance and, as a matter of fact, has no 'partiality' towards knowledge: it manifests both—knowledge and ignorance—equally well with equal immediacy, i.e., without the mediation of a cognitive state. In the very heart and texture of consciousness, there is the interplay of knowledge and ignorance. If one is light and the other is darkness, the two are opposed, but in what sense? They indeed have *sahāvasthāna-sāmarthya*, they do coexist as in an ill-lit room. The coexistence of opposites is the very ontological nature of our experience. They both, in their interplay are evident, there is no unknown existence of either of them.

2. Add to this, my earlier version of the *Vivaraṇa* thesis, and the prospect of omniscience vanishes: If all things are manifested, i.e., become objects of awareness, *both* as known and as unknown, you cannot simply know a thing in all its aspects. This position is closer to the Husserlian perspectivism than to the Heideggerean, for the reason that according to Heidegger every unconcealment brings with it some concealment which would imply that some knowing would bring with it some unknowing—whereas in the Advaita view there is no passing on to ignorance, there is only movement in the other direction—from

ignorance to knowledge. True omniscience is not knowing *all* things including mountains on the moon or blackholes, but knowing the fundamental ontological principles, not the *ontic* sundry entities.

3. There is an irremediably temporal feature of the interplay of knowledge and ignorance. Very briefly, this can be shown in the following manner. A *pramā* is manifested by awareness *as* destroying the *past* ignorance (of the object of that *pramā*); likewise, awareness of ignorance also manifests the *future*, yet-to-be, *pramā* (of the same object). As is said in the *Advaitasiddhi*, *ajñānaviśeṣaṇatayā tu anutpannamapi jñānaṁ sākṣivedyamiti*. This temporality of the interplay between knowledge and ignorance, the reference to what has been and to what is not yet, is ingrained in the texture of our awareness.

All along I am using 'awareness' for *sākṣicaitanya*, whose ontological nature is not thematized in this paper.

Truth vs. Workability Rehashed

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It is with a strong sense of *deja vu* that I find myself speaking to you in Calcutta on perception in the winter of 1995. Only about a mile from here, only twelve years ago now, I addressed some of you on the same topic, on the occasion of a memorable meeting that took place at Jadavpur University and was attended by a luminary body that included, besides numerous eminent Indian philosophers and others from India, the likes of Willard van Orman Quine and Donald Davidson from across the seas in my country. On that occasion I delivered a paper which was eventually (but only ten years later) published under the title 'Does *Prāmāṇya* Mean Truth?'[1], in which I made the claim that *prāmāṇya*, regularly rendered as 'truth' in translations of Sanskrit philosophical texts, doesn't mean that in general, but rather means something like 'workability' or 'practical efficacy'.

Actually, the Calcutta paper wasn't my first attempt to defend this view. In a seminar held, as I best recall, sometime prior to 1982 and dealing with much the same topic as we are gathered to consider today, I argued more or less the same thesis about truth vs. workability in a critique of J.N. Mohanty's excellent book *Gaṅgeśa's Theory of Truth* (Santiniketan 1966).[2]

All of this recent history is retold to set the stage for the present paper. In the second edition of Mohanty's book (Delhi 1989) he kindly